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Judah Halevi and Abraham Ibn Ezra

Introduction

Neither Judah Halevi (*c.* 1075–1141) nor Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) can properly be called a 'philosopher', if by that term one means a writer of systematic works of philosophy. The former made his reputation as a poet; the latter as a biblical exegete. But the writings of these two friends and occasional travel-companions, together with the writings of Maimonides, established the character of Jewish philosophy well into the modern period. And despite the very real differences in their intellectual outlooks, especially in their attitudes towards the neoplatonized Aristotelianism that dominated Islamic philosophy in early twelfth-century Muslim Spain, they share much more in common than is usually recognized.

Halevi expounds his views on Judaism in a dialogue commonly known as the *Kuzari*, but whose real title is *The Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion*. The *Kuzari* purports to be a record of the conversations between a Jewish sage and a Khazar king who converted to Judaism, together with his subjects. It is very loosely based on an actual historical event, the conversion of the Bulan king of the Khazars to Judaism in the late eighth century. But the historical incident is merely a springboard for Halevi's exposition and defence of Judaism, with the king and the sage serving as mouthpieces for the author. In fact, the dialogue may be read as an internal conversation between two aspects of the Halevi's *persona*: that of the acculturated Islamified intellectual attracted to philosophy as a source of truth and existential meaning, and that of the committed Jew who clings to the tradition of prophecy, Torah and the covenant between God and Israel. There is a deep affinity between these two aspects in Halevi, which may be why the dialogue, for all its medieval artificiality, succeeds brilliantly in engaging the reader's attention.

The affinity may also be the result of the author's attitude of ambivalence towards philosophy. On the one hand, the Jewish sage of the dialogue criticizes philosophical doctrines such as the emanation of the intellects and the spheres from God, the philosophers' description of the soul, the naturalistic interpretation of Divine prophecy and providence, and, above all, the implications of the philosophical worldview for a life of piety. That worldview is stated with admirable clarity by a philosopher at the outset of the work. But the Jewish sage also praises the philosophers for

their achievements, and considers Socrates to have reached the highest rank possible for man without the aid of revelation. Halevi believed that the Greeks should not be blamed for their 'errors'; had they experienced divine revelation they would have willingly accepted the doctrines of creation, miracles, prophecy and divine law.

Like many religious thinkers, Halevi argues that reason is insufficient to answer the deepest questions of human existence. But unlike others who argue for a knowledge based on faith or mystical experience, Halevi justifies his knowledge-claims through an appeal to the historical and religious experience of Israel, especially the prophets, who are endowed with a special sense (an 'inner eye') that enables them to obtain truth directly from God. Prophets are part of a special class of beings intermediate between humans and angels, who are called 'divine ones' (*ilāhīyūn*), and who are the choicest descendants of Adam. The laws under which they operate are encapsulated in the commandments of the Torah, especially the ceremonial ones. Because of the prophetic message, Israel, and only Israel, lives a life in accordance with the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*), the principle that regulates the supernatural level of sublunar existence, the level on which miracles, providence and revelation occur. Israel is the elite of the nations, and the prophets are the elite of Israel.

The claim that the Jews have a special innate metaphysical status is not found in Ibn Ezra. For the biblical exegete there is no additional level of being between human beings and the heavens, and there are no different 'quasi-species' of humans who are privy to information about God and His relation to the world. But there are levels *within* the species: the wisest of the humans, the *maskilim* ('intellectuals') are able to demonstrate God's existence by means of reason, whereas the multitude need the concrete evidence of history. That is why the first of the Ten Commandments is formulated to include both the intellectuals (*'I am YHVH your God'*) and the multitude (*Who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the House of Bondage*, Exod. 20:1). In a famous passage, Ibn Ezra informs us that he was asked by Rabbi Judah Halevi why God, in this verse, is referred to as the one who brought Israel out of the Land of Egypt, rather than as the creator of the world, clearly a more impressive feat. In the *Kuzari*, the Khazar king asks the same question of the Jewish sage. The different replies are indicative of the differences between the two thinkers. According to Ibn Ezra, the precise understanding of creation is a matter of controversy between the Jews and the gentile sages. The Jews believe in creation at a particular point in time, whereas the gentiles have the notion of a perpetual creation. Since God's existence can be demonstrated without appealing to creation, there was no need to mention it in this verse. Note that this implies that the first of the Ten Commandments, if not actually addressed to the gentiles, does not exclude them from its comprehension. By contrast, Halevi sees the first commandment as directed only to the Jews, and comprehensible only by the Jews, because the gentile philosophers are unable to demonstrate rationally the truths of rational, political religion. Knowledge that God exists can only be attained by and from those who experienced the divine presence in history.

Scholars often characterize Halevi's position as 'particularist' and Ibn Ezra's position (and later, the position of Maimonides and the Jewish Aristotelians) as 'universalist'. But these terms are misleading, because there is a particularist and a universalist element in both positions. For Halevi, true wisdom is available first and foremost to the Jews, yet through them, to the rest of the world. The Jews escape

the natural order through attachment to the divine order, which is attained through the performance of the commandments. For Ibn Ezra, true wisdom is available first and foremost to the wise, yet through them, to the rest of the world. Certain people escape the natural (astrally determined) order through attachment to the Worthy Name of God ('YHVH', God's proper name), which is attained through the acquisition of wisdom. To be sure, Ibn Ezra is not entirely open about what sort of wisdom brings about attachment to the Worthy Name, and his reticence led his commentators to interpret him in the light of their own predilections. But whatever sort of wisdom, the way to escape astral destiny is through exercising one's intellect. Performance of the commandments is relevant only in so far as it instructs or prepares the intellect for this attachment to the higher realm.

The notion that the wise man can escape his astral destiny through the exercise of intellect is at least as old as the Greek astrologer/astronomer Ptolemy, but through Ibn Ezra (and later Gersonides) it becomes a prominent theme in Jewish treatments of astrology, although in some versions it is not the wise man who escapes astral destiny through exercising his wisdom, but the Jew, through observance of the commandments. In any event, the underlying message here is one of optimism and hope. Humans can take the initiative and elevate themselves above the deterministic, astral mechanism of sublunar existence.

Halevi's *Kuzari* and Ibn Ezra's *Commentary on the Pentateuch* were very influential in subsequent Jewish thought, though not always in the same place or period. Elements of Halevi's thought can be discerned in thirteenth-century Kabbalah, but it had little impact upon Jewish philosophy until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, since which time its fortunes have waxed and waned, depending upon the *zeitgeist*. Halevi's elevation of religious feeling made him popular with romanticists, his proto-nationalism with Zionists, and his devaluation of rational speculation with Kabbalists and religious existentialists. Ibn Ezra's heyday as a thinker came during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when his combination of neoplatonism and astrology was taken up and developed by a circle of Jewish thinkers in Spain. His reputation as the rationalist exegete of scripture par excellence has continued well into the modern period, and many consider him to be the ancestor of modern biblical criticism.

Judah Halevi, *The Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion (The Kuzari)* (*c.* 1140)

Book I [The Philosopher's Creed]

(1.1) I was asked about whatever argumentation I had against those who differ with us, such as the philosophers and the adherents of [other] religions, as well as the

J. Halevi, *The Book of Refutation and Proof on Behalf of the Despised Religion (The Kuzari)*, trans. B. Kogan and L. Berman (Yale Judaica Series, forthcoming). The translator's notes have been omitted.

dissenters who differ with the multitude [of Jews], and I recalled what I had heard of the arguments of the [Jewish] sage, who was with the king of the Khazars when the latter adopted the religion of the Jews (some 400 years ago today) according to the testimony mentioned in the 'Book of Histories'.

A dream came to him repeatedly as though an angel were addressing him, saying, 'Your intention is pleasing to God, but your actions are not pleasing.' Now he used to be very diligent with regard to the worship [prescribed] by the Khazar religion to the extent that he himself used to officiate at the temple-service and the sacrifices with a pure and sincere intent. Nevertheless, each time he strove diligently in regard to those acts, the angel came to him at night, telling him, 'Your intention is pleasing, but your actions are not pleasing.' This prompted him to investigate the [various] religions and sects, and ultimately both he and the multitude of the Khazars became Jews. Some of the arguments of the sage seemed persuasive to me and in agreement with my [own] belief. Accordingly, I thought that I should record that argumentation just as it took place, *and the intelligent will understand* (Dan. 12:10).

It has been reported that when the king of the Khazars realized in his dream that his intention was pleasing to God but his actions were not pleasing, and [when he further realized] in his sleep that He was commanding him to seek out those actions that would be pleasing to God, he asked a philosopher about the latter's belief.

The philosopher said to him: With God there is no being pleased [with someone] and no feeling hatred [towards someone], because He, may He be exalted, is beyond desires and aims. The reason is that [having] an aim indicates there is a deficiency in the one who has it, while achieving one's aim is a perfection for him [who does so]; but as long as it remains unfulfilled, it is a deficiency. Likewise, according to the philosophers, He is beyond the knowledge of particulars because they change with the times, whereas there is no change in God's knowledge. Therefore, He is not aware of you, let alone of your intentions and your actions, nor [for that matter] does He hear your prayer[s] or observe your movements.

Indeed, even though the philosophers say that He created you, [this is meant only] metaphorically because He is the cause of [all the] causes [involved] in the creation of every created thing, not because this [creation] was intended on His part. Indeed, [the fact of the matter is that] He did not create man at all because the world is eternal; and man has never ceased coming into being out of [the] man before him. Combined within him there are forms, natural dispositions, and character traits [coming] from his father, his mother and his relatives, as well as qualities [derived] from the [different] climates, lands, foods and [types of] water, [interacting] with the influences of the [celestial] spheres, the planets and the signs of the zodiac, through the [various] relations that come about because of them. Everything goes back to the First Cause, not because of an aim that it has, but rather [because of] an emanation from which a second cause emanated, then a third, and [then] a fourth [set of] causes. These causes and their effects are necessarily connected to one another and have become part of a [continuous] chain, just as you see them. Their necessary connection is eternal, just as the First Cause is eternal; it has no beginning.

Now every single individual in this world has causes by means of which it may be made complete. Thus, an individual whose causes are perfect becomes perfect,

while an individual whose causes are deficient becomes deficient, like the Ethiopian who is capable of receiving no more than the form of a man and whose reasoning capacity is at the most deficient level possible. But the philosopher is someone [who is] provided with dispositions by means of which he receives the natural, moral, intellectual and practical virtues, and does not lack anything pertaining to perfection. These perfections, however, are [at first only] potential, and they need both instruction and training in order to bring them to actuality. [Only] then will the individual aptitudes with which he was provided become manifest as, for instance, a perfection, a deficiency, or as [one of] an infinite variety of intermediate states.

Accordingly, a light belonging to the divine hierarchy, called the Active Intellect, [will] attach itself to the perfect individual, [and] his passive intellect [will] attach itself to that light [with such] accord that the individual will think that he is that Active Intellect, with there being no difference between the two of them. His organs, I mean, the limbs of that individual, will be used only in [performing] the most perfect actions, at the most appropriate times, and in accordance with the very best conditions, as if they were organs of the Active Intellect itself, and not of the material, passive intellect, which used to employ them before, sometimes rightly, but more often wrongly. The former [the Active Intellect] always does so in the right way.

This degree [of perfection] is the ultimate end for which the perfect individual hopes after his soul has been purified of doubts and has acquired mastery of the sciences according to their true character, so that it may come to be like an angel. It thus attains the lowest level of what is divine, which is separate from [material] bodies. This is the level of the Active Intellect, an angel whose rank is just below that of the angel which is in charge of the sphere of the moon. They are [both] Intellects devoid of [the various kinds of] matter [and] co-eternal with the First Cause. They do not fear extinction – ever. Thus, the soul of the perfect man and that [Active] Intellect become one [and the same] thing. He is not concerned about the extinction of his body and his organs because he and that [Active Intellect] have become one [and the same thing]. His soul delights in life because he becomes a part of the group [that includes] Hermes, Aesculapius, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In fact, he and they, and everyone who is at their level [of perfection], and the Active Intellect *are* one [and the same] thing. This, then, is what is called 'God's being pleased', [speaking] symbolically or by way of approximation.

Pursue it, therefore, and pursue knowledge of the true realities of things so that your intellect may become active and not passive. Keep to the way that is most just in regard to [both] character traits and actions because it helps one to conceive that which is true, to persevere in study, and to resemble that [same] Active Intellect. Contentment, modesty and submissiveness, and every virtuous character trait will follow this, together with reverence for the First Cause, not in order to have it grant you its favour nor to spare you its wrath, but in order [for you] to resemble the Active Intellect by preferring truth [over falsehood], describing every thing as it should be described, and believing it to be as it [actually] is. These are some of the attributes of the intellect. Once you can be described by this kind of belief, you will not be concerned about what kind of divine law you observe or profess or revere, or [for that matter] what kind of speech, language or actions [you employ to do

so]. Or else, create a religion for yourself for the sake of [cultivating] submissiveness, reverence and praise, as well as for governing your character traits, your home and your city, if you are accepted by them. Or adopt the intellectual nomoi [that is, the laws] composed by the philosophers as your religion. Make the purification of your soul your purpose and your aim, and, in general, seek out the purification of your heart in any way that is possible for you, after [first] acquiring knowledge of the universals [belonging to] the sciences in accordance with their true character. Then you will achieve your goal, I mean, attachment to that spiritual entity, that is, the Active Intellect. Perhaps it will inform you [about the past and the future] and command you through a knowledge of hidden things [that comes] by way of veridical dreams and images that are right on the mark.

(1:2) The Khazar said to him: Your statement is certainly persuasive, but it is not in keeping with my request because I know by myself that my soul is pure [and that I] direct [my] actions towards pleasing the Lord, Nevertheless, I was told that these actions are not pleasing, even though the intention is pleasing. Undoubtedly, therefore, there are certain actions which are pleasing in themselves [and] not dependent on mere opinions. . . .

(1:4) The Khazar said: What [source of] perplexity could be greater in the opinion of the philosophers than the [Christians' and the Muslims'] belief in complete innovation – that the world was created in six days and that the First Cause speaks to individual human beings? Not only that, [there is the problem of God's] being beyond the knowledge of particulars, which the philosophers have declared regarding Him. Nevertheless, on the strength of the philosophers' actions, their [knowledge of the] sciences, their investigation [of the truth], and their independent judgement, prophecy should have been well known and widespread [among them], owing to their attachment to spiritual things; and they should be described as [having performed] extraordinary feats, miracles and wonders too. But, in fact, we sometimes see veridical dreams [come] to someone who has not been concerned with science nor with the purification of his soul, while we find the very opposite of this in the case of those who have sought it. This proves that the divine order [of things] as well as the souls [of certain human beings] have a secret [character] other than what you have mentioned, O philosopher.

[The Khazar then invites a Christian sage and a Muslim teacher to present their doctrines and observances. Since they both agree that God performed miracles for the children of Israel, the Khazar decides to invite a Jewish sage to discuss his creed.]

[The Jewish Sage's Creed]

(1:11) Accordingly, [the Jewish sage] said to him: I put [my] faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel who brought the children of Israel out of Egypt with signs and miracles, provided for them in the wilderness, and gave them the land of Syro-Palestine after they had crossed the Sea [of Reeds] and the Jordan [River] miraculously. He sent Moses with His Law, [and] then thousands of prophets after him to support His Law by means of promises [of reward] to whoever observed it and threats [of punishment] to whoever disobeyed it. Our faith [pertains] to all that was included in the Torah, but the story is long.

(1:12) The Khazar said: I had [originally] decided not to ask a Jew because I knew about the destruction of their traditions and the inferiority of their opinions, since

their misfortune has not left them [anything] worth praising. Why, then, didn't you say, O Jew, that you put your faith in the Creator of the world, [who] orders it and governs it, and in Him who created you and provided for you, and [use] similar such descriptions, which constitute proof for everyone who has a religion? Because of descriptions like these, people pursue truth and justice in order to imitate the Creator in His wisdom and justice.

(1:13) The sage said: What you are referring to is [really] the syllogistic, governmental religion to which speculation leads, but it contains many doubtful points. Ask the philosophers about it, and you will not find them agreeing on a single action or a single belief because they are [merely] claims. Some of them, they can demonstrate. Some of them, they can show to be persuasive; but some of them they cannot [even] show to be persuasive, let alone establish by demonstration.

(1:14) The Khazar said: I think your speech [now], O Jew, is more likely [to persuade me] than the opening part of it was before, and I would like [to hear] more.

(1:15) The sage said: On the contrary, the opening part of my speech is the demonstration. What is more, it is [based on] direct observation and doesn't need proof and demonstration.

(1:16) The Khazar said: How is that [possible]?

(1:17) The sage said: Permit me to make some preliminary comments, because I see that you are showing disdain for my [opening] statement and making light of it.

(1:18) The Khazar said: Make your preliminary comments so that I may hear [them].

(1:19) The sage said: If you were told that the ruler of India is virtuous and that you should revere him, praise his name and recount his exploits because of what had come to you[r attention] about the justice of the people of his country, [signifying] both the excellence of their character traits and the justice of their conduct towards one another, would this compel you [to do so]?

(1:20) The Khazar said: How could it compel me, when there is doubt as to whether the justice of the people of India is due to their own nature and they have no king or [whether in having one] their justice is due to their king, or [whether] the fact is due to both causes taken together?

(1:21) The sage said: But then, if his messenger came to you with [typically] Indian gifts, about which you have no doubt that they are found only in India, in the palaces of kings, along with a message in which it is attested that it is from him [that is, the king], and accompanied by medicines that cure you of your illnesses and preserve your health, as well as poisons for your enemies and those who wage war against you, with which you may confront them and kill them without [either] preparation or [superior] numbers, would you be obligated to obey him?

(1:22) The Khazar said: Yes, of course, [I would]. My previous doubt as to whether India has a king or not would have disappeared, and I would believe that his dominion and his command (*amr*) extend to me.

(1:23) The sage said: If you were asked about him, how would you describe him?

(1:24) The Khazar said: By means of those attributes that, in my opinion, were well established on the basis of direct observation. Then I would follow them up with those [other attributes] that are generally accepted and have become evident by means of these last ones [I mentioned].

(1:25) The sage said: Well, I answered you in [exactly] the same way when you questioned me; and Moses began, addressing Pharaoh in the same way too when he told him, 'The God of the Hebrews has sent me to you', meaning, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, since their story was well known among the nations as well as [the fact] that a divine order (*amr ilāhī*) accompanied them, took interest in them, and performed wonders for them. He did not tell him, 'The Lord of heaven and earth [sent me]', or 'My Creator and your Creator sent me'. And God also began His address to the multitude of the children of Israel in the same way [by saying], 'I am [the] God, whom you worship, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. . . .' He did not say, 'I am the Creator of the world and your Creator'. Accordingly, I began [to speak to] you this way, O commander of the Khazars, when you asked me about my faith. I answered you in terms of what is compelling for me and for the community of the children of Israel for whom that [which I have described] is well established on the basis of direct observation and subsequently, through uninterrupted tradition, which is as valid as direct observation.
(1:26) The Khazar said, Then your Law is a legacy for yourselves only.
(1:27) The sage said: Yes, [that is so]; but whoever joins us from among the nations especially will share in our good [fortune] (Num. 10:29), although he will not be equal to us. Now, if the requirement of [fulfilling] the Law were due to the fact that [God] created us, then [all people], the white and the black, would indeed be equal in regard to [that obligation] because all of them are His creation, exalted be He. But [the requirement of fulfilling] the Law is [in fact] due to His having brought us out of Egypt and His becoming attached to us because we are the choicest (*safwāh*) of the descendants of Adam.

[Is the World Eternal or Created?]
(1:62) The Khazar said: Granted that I argued against you [by referring to] ignorant common people and a people that has no agreed-upon doctrine. So, you were right on the mark [in your] reply. But what will you say about the philosophers, given where they are with respect to investigation and accuracy? They have reached agreement on [both] the eternity of the world in the future and [its] eternity in the past, and this is not [a matter of merely] tens of thousands of years or millions of years, but of what has no limit [at all].
(1:63) The sage said: The philosophers may be excused [for agreeing on this opinion] because they are a group that has inherited neither knowledge nor religion; for they are Greeks, and the Greeks belong to the descendants of *Yefet*, who dwell in the North. However, the knowledge inherited from Adam, namely, the knowledge [that is] confirmed by a divine order (*amr ilāhī*) exists only among the descendants of Shem, who was the choicest [offspring] of Noah. This knowledge has not ceased and will not cease [to exist] among the choicest [offspring] deriving from Adam. Knowledge arose among the Greeks only after they began to triumph [over their adversaries], for knowledge was transmitted to them by the Persians and [was transmitted] to the Persians by the Chaldeans. [It was only] then that the famous philosophers in the [Greek] empire appeared among them, not before [this] and not afterwards. But once power passed to the Romans, no famous philosopher arose among them.

(1:64) The Khazar said: This implies that the knowledge [imparted by] Aristotle should not be accepted as true.

(1:65) The sage said: Indeed [it does]. He demanded too much of his mind and his [own] thinking, since he had no [reliable] tradition from someone he could trust without question. Thus, he reflected on the first [principles] of the world and also on its final [principles]. Now, it was [as] difficult for his [way of] thinking to conceive of a beginning [for the world] as it was [to conceive of its] eternity in the past, but he [ultimately] gave greater weight to those of his deductions that assert the eternity [of the world] in the past by means of his abstract thinking. He didn't think of asking about the chronology of those who had lived before him or about how people were related to one another. If the Philosopher had [lived] within a nation [in which] he had inherited traditional opinions and generally accepted beliefs that could not be rejected, he would certainly have used his [powers of] reasoning and demonstration for the sake of establishing the possibility of the [world's] complete innovation, despite the difficulty involved in it, just as he established the possibility of the [world's] eternity in the past, which is [even] more difficult to accept.

(1:66) The Khazar said: In [scientific] demonstration, is there [such a thing as] giving greater weight [to one opinion rather than another]?

(1:67) The sage said: Who, indeed, could provide us with the [decisive] demonstration on this question? God forbid that the Law [should] teach something that repudiates [the testimony of] direct sense experience or [the conclusion of] a demonstration. However, it does report [the occurrence of] miracles and the disruption of the customary workings [of things] by the creation of [entirely new] substances or by turning one [existing] substance into another to indicate [the existence of] the Creator of the world and His power to do whatever He wishes, whenever He wishes. The [whole] question of eternity in the past and bringing things into being completely new is profound, and the proofs [in favour] of the two arguments counterbalance one another. In that case, then, the tradition from Adam, Noah and Moses, peace be upon them, based on prophecy, which is more trustworthy than reasoning, tips the balance in favour of [God's] bringing things into being completely new. But even if an adherent of the religious Law is forced to concede and acknowledge the existence of eternal matter and many worlds prior to this world, there is nothing in this [concession] that refutes his belief that this world came into existence at a specific time in the past and that its first human inhabitants were Adam and Eve.

[The Descent of the Divine Order on Israel]

(1:95) The sage said: Give me a little [more time] so that I may establish the nobility of the people in your eyes. It is sufficient evidence for me that God took them [for Himself, both] as a group and as a nation from among [all] the religious communities of the world, and that the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*) dwelled with the multitude of them so that all of them reached [the level of] being addressed [by God]. Moreover, the matter [also] extended to their women so that some of them became prophetesses after [a period during which] the order (*amr*) used to dwell only with unique [male] individuals among the people from *Adam* on down.

Now *Adam* was altogether perfect because there [can be] no fault in the perfection of an artefact that derives from a wise [and] capable Artisan, [and] consists of

matter that He chose for the form He wished [to give it]. No obstacle interfered [in his case] because of the father's sperm mingling with the mother's blood, nor because of diet and regimen during the years of [early] education and childhood, nor because of the influence of [different kinds of] air, water and soil, since [God] created him, rather, as someone at the very peak of youth, who was perfect in regard to both his physical constitution and his character traits. Accordingly, it is he who [simultaneously] received the soul in its most perfect state, the intellect at the highest degree [of development] possible for human nature, and also the divine capacity [that comes] after the intellect, I mean, the level at which one may have contact with God and the spiritual beings and also know truths without their being taught, but rather with [only] the slightest thought. Among us, he was called 'a son of God'. He and all those like him among his offspring are [also called] 'sons of God'. He begat many children (Gen. 5:4), but none of them was fit to be *Adam's* successor except *Abel*, because he [alone] was like him. When his brother *Cain* killed him out of jealousy over this status, [*Abel*] was replaced by *Seth*, who was [also] like *Adam*, for he was [*Adam's*] choicest [offspring] and the best part of him, while others were like husks and dates of poor quality. . . . The choicest [offspring] of *Seth* was *Enosh*. In a similar way, the order (*al-amr*) reached *Noah* through individuals who were the best part [of their predecessors], like *Adam*, and they were also called 'sons of God'. They [too] were perfectly endowed in regard to [their] physical constitution, character traits, longevity, [knowledge of] the sciences, and strength. The length of their [combined] lifetimes is identical with the chronology from *Adam* to *Noah*, and [it is] likewise from *Noah* to Abraham.

Now at times there were those among them to whom the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*) did not attach itself, such as *Terah*, but Abraham, his son, was the *disciple* of his grandfather, *Eber*. Yes, and he also knew *Noah* himself. Thus, the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*) ended up establishing a continuous chain from ancestors to descendants, for Abraham was the choicest [offspring] of *Eber* as well as his disciple. That is why he was called a Hebrew (Gen. 14:13). *Eber* was the choicest [offspring] of *Shem* and *Shem* was the choicest [offspring] of *Noah* because he was the heir of the temperate climes, whose central and most distinguished part is Syro-Palestine, the land of prophecy, while *Yefet* departed for the North and *Ham* for the South. Now the choicest [offspring] of Abraham from among all his sons was Isaac, and [Abraham] sent all of his [other] children far away from this special land so that it might become the exclusive possession of Isaac. The choicest [offspring] of Isaac was Jacob. His brother Esau was rejected because Jacob was entitled to that land [by right]. Now all of the children of Jacob were the choicest [offspring of their father] and fit for the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*). Accordingly, that place which is specially set aside for the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*) came to be theirs. This was the beginning of the divine order's dwelling with a [whole] community after having been found only among particular individuals [beforehand].

Then God undertook to preserve them, cultivate them, and care for them in Egypt, just as a tree, which has good roots, is cultivated until it has borne perfect fruit like the original fruit from which it was planted, I mean, [of course,] Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers. The fruit produced Moses, peace be upon him, and also Aaron and *Miriam*, peace be upon them, as well as [others] like *Bezalel*,

Oholiab (Exod. 35:30–35), the heads of the tribes, and those like the seventy elders, who were fit for continuous prophecy (Num. 11:24–5), Joshua, Caleb (Num. 13:30 14:6ff.) and Hur (Exod. 17:10; 24:14), and many others besides them. At that time, they were [all] worthy of the light [of God] manifesting itself to them as well as that [aforementioned] divine providence, even though there were rebellious and loathsome individuals among them. But they are undoubtedly a most select group in the sense that, because of their innate character as well as their natures, they belonged to the choicest [part of humanity]. Moreover, they begat those who would become [the] choicest. Accordingly, the father who was rebellious would be preserved for the sake of that which is mingled within him of what is choicest, which would [later] appear in his child or in his grandchild, insofar as the semen was pure, as we have said with regard to *Terah* and others besides him, to whom the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*) did not attach itself. However, it was in their innate character to bring forth choice offspring, [while] there was nothing comparable to that in the innate character of anyone descended from *Ham* and *Yefet*. We see something like this in things that are natural. [Consider] how many men do not resemble their fathers at all, but do resemble their grandfathers! There is no doubt that that nature and that resemblance were latent within the father, even though they were not evident to the senses, just as the nature of *Eber* was latent within his children until it became manifest in Abraham.

Book II [Intellectual Law and Divine Law]

(2:48) The sage said: These and similar such things are the intellectual *nomoi* [that is, laws]. They are the preparation and preamble to the divine religious Law and precede it [both] in nature and in time, They are indispensable for governing any group of human beings, no matter what [it may be], so that even a band of robbers cannot avoid adhering to justice in what is [simply] between them. Otherwise, their association would not last. Now when Israel's rebelliousness got to the point that they disregarded [even] the intellectual and governmental Laws, which are [as] indispensable for [the existence of] every group as certain natural things are indispensable for every individual, like eating and drinking, moving and resting, and sleeping and being awake, but nevertheless held fast to the [ritual] acts of worship pertaining to the sacrifices and the other divine [and] traditional Laws. He became satisfied with less from them. Hence, they were told [in effect]: If only you kept the Laws that [even] the least and lowest groups accept as obligatory, such as adhering to justice and what is good and also acknowledging God's bounty! For the divine Law can only be fulfilled completely after perfect [adherence to] the governmental and intellectual Law [has been achieved], and included within the intellectual Law is [both] adhering to justice and acknowledging God's bounty. Accordingly, how is it [acceptable] for someone who neglects this [to offer] sacrifices, and to observe the Sabbath and circumcision, and other things of that sort that the intellect neither requires nor rejects. They are the Laws by means of which Israel was singled out, [constituting] an addition to the intellectual [Laws], and by means of which the bounty of the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*) reached them. But they did not know how these Laws were obligatory, just as they did not know how it happened that

the glory of YHVH descended among them, [how] the fire of YHVH consumes their sacrifices, how they heard the Lord's address to them, and how everything that happened to them took place with respect to the various things that [people's] intellects can[not] bear to think possible – were it not for direct experience and the personally attested spectacle [they saw], which cannot be rejected. Thus, it was because of [a situation] like this that they were addressed [with the words], 'What does YHVH require of you' (Micah 6:8), and 'Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices' (Jer. 7:21), and other [passages] like these. Is it possible for the true Israelite to confine himself to 'doing justice' and 'loving mercy' (Micah 6:8), while treating circumcision, the Sabbath and the rest of the commandments as superfluous, but [still] prosper?

Book III [The Good Person]

(3:2) The Khazar said: Describe for me the actions of a good person today.
(3:3) The sage said: The good person is the guardian of his city, acting justly and assigning its people their daily provisions and everything they need. He treats them fairly inasmuch as he does not cheat any of them nor give anyone more than that which he deserves. Subsequently, when he needs them, he will find them obedient, immediately responsive to his call. He commands them, and they carry out [his] command. He forbids them, and they desist.
(3:4) The Khazar said: I asked you about a good person, not about a leader.
(3:5) The sage said: The good person is [precisely the] one who is a leader, [someone] obeyed by his senses as well as his psychic and bodily faculties. He governs them by political governance, just as it is said: 'And [it is better] to have self-control than to conquer a city' (Prov. 16:32). He is the one who is [truly] fit for leadership because if he were to lead a city, he would deal justly with it, in the same way that he deals justly with his body and his soul. For he has subdued his appetitive faculties and prevented them from exceeding [their proper limits] after giving them their rightful share and providing them with whatever will remedy their deficiencies, through food in moderation, drink in moderation, bathing, and [pursuing] a livelihood in moderation too. He has also subdued his spirited faculties, which [characteristically] demand an appearance of victory, after giving them their rightful portion and providing them a stake in the [kind of] victory that is useful, as [in] debates about the sciences and the opinions [that people hold], and also in rebuking malicious people.

Moreover, he has also given his senses their rightful share in whatever redounds to his benefit, so that he directs his hands, feet and tongue towards what is necessary and [making] the most useful choice. The same [holds true for] hearing and seeing, and the common sense, [which] follows them, then, for imagination, estimation, cogitation and memory, and then [for] the faculty of volition which gives directions to all of these. Moreover, [the faculty of volition] takes direction too, serving [according] to the free choice of the intellect.

Now, he does not neglect [even] one of these limbs and faculties with regard to whatever concerns it alone, lest it damage the rest. When he has satisfied the need each of them has and given them a sufficient amount of rest and sleep and also

[given] the vital faculties all that sustains them with respect to wakefulness and movement in [attending to the various] activities of this world, he then calls upon his community, just as the leader who is obeyed calls upon his troops, who are obedient to whatever he has in mind, to attach [themselves] to that level which is above them, I mean, the divine level, which is above the intellectual level.

Thus, he arranges his "community" hierarchically and organizes it [by] imitating the way in which Moses, our master, peace be upon him, arranged his community hierarchically around Mount Sinai, He commands the faculty of volition to be receptive [and] obedient to whatever order comes from him so that it will follow him immediately and thus employ the [other] faculties and limbs in accordance with whatever he orders without disagreement. Moreover, he commands [the faculty of volition] not to pay attention to the demons of the estimative and imaginative [faculties], and to neither accept them nor assent to them until it consults with the intellect. If it approves what they have [to present, the faculty of volition] accepts it; but if not, it rebels against them both. Thus, the voluntary [faculty] accepts that [judgement] by [the intellect] and resolves to follow it, guiding the organs of cogitation and freeing it from all the previous mundane thoughts. It assigns the imaginative [faculty] the task of presenting the most splendid representations of existing things that it has, with the aid of memory, so that it may thereby imitate the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*), which is being sought, such as, for example, the scene of Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:20–21; Deut. 4:9–5:28), and the scene of Abraham and Isaac at Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:11–18), and also the Tabernacle of Moses, peace be upon him, the order of the [Temple] service (Exod. 25:1–9), the indwelling of the [divine] glory within the Temple, and much else besides. He orders the retentive [imagination] to hold that in trust and not to forget it. Moreover, he prevents the estimative [faculty] and its demons from making the truth seem unclear and doubtful. He also prevents the aggressive and appetitive [faculties] from prejudicing and corrupting the voluntary [faculty], and causing it to be preoccupied with whatever anger and desire [they harbour] within themselves.

After this preliminary [activity], the voluntary faculty rouses all of the limbs that are employed by it [to respond] with ardour, eagerness and joy, so that they stand when it is time to stand, without becoming sluggish; they prostrate themselves when it orders them to prostrate themselves; and they sit down when it is time to be seated. [The] eyes are fixed, like those of a servant, on his master (Ps. 123:2). Both hands stop their fidgeting, and the one does not [even] touch the other. Both feet face straight ahead for the purpose of standing up, and all of his limbs are at attention, as though stunned and fearful, in order to obey their ruler, unconcerned by [the prospect of] their undergoing pain or fatigue. The tongue conforms with the thought so that it does not exceed it [by idle talk]. In his prayer, he does not speak in a rote or mechanical way like the starling and the parrot. On the contrary, there is both thought and reflection in every word so that his hour [at prayer] becomes the choicest part of his time as well as its fruit, while the rest of his hours become like pathways leading to that one. He longs for its approach because during that time he resembles those beings that are spiritual and is remote from those that are bestial. Thus, the fruit of his day and his night becomes those three times of prayer, and their [weekly] fruit is the Sabbath day because it is reserved for entering into

contact with the divine order (*al-amr al-ilāhī*) (Gen. 2:3) and worshipping it with joy, not with submissiveness, as has been explained. . .

Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Long Commentary on Exodus* (*c.* mid-twelfth century)

Exodus 3:15 [The Doctrine of the Three Worlds]

I will now mention the reason [for God's revealing the Worthy Name to Moses].

Know that there are three worlds. The first is the lower world, whose many ranks [of being] are included in the three [principal ones]. The first is metals, which number seven, the same as the seven ministers [i.e., the planets].[1] Above them are plants, of which there are many ranks. Above them are living things, of which there are many ranks. On the highest rank in the lower world, by himself, is Man. His body undergoes alteration, as does his soul, in relation to his [changing] thoughts. His occupation and his affairs also undergo alteration. The wise men have compared the species (which are the preserved universals, since the particulars are destroyed); they have compared these universal, permanent species to the shadow of a tree upon everflowing water.[2]

The intermediate world has many ranks. The five ministering planets are of high rank, since they exist through themselves, and are neither corrupt nor deficient. Neither do their movements alter, increase or diminish, ascend or descend. However, they undergo many alterations due to the stellar configuration, for sometimes a planet is on the line of the zodiac; sometime more or less to the left or right; sometimes it ascends in its epicycle, or even in its eccentric, whose centre deviates from the centre of the earth. Sometimes its orbit ascends or descends; sometimes it hurries, sometimes it tarries, and sometimes it stands; sometimes it retreats. (All this is with respect to Earth.) Sometimes it is visible, and sometimes it is hidden; sometimes in the East, and sometimes in the West. Its relation to the star with which it conjoins, to the heavenly host above,[3] and to the moon below, is forever and unfathomably changing, for sometimes it is conjoined with one of the seven aspects. Now there are one hundred and twenty conjunctions in each one of the 360 degrees. As a result of all these alterations, all the creatures of the lower world will become altered in their essence, and even in their accidental properties.[4] [The planets] themselves are not altered in their essence, or in their light. Hence the moon is inferior to them, for whatever befalls them befalls the moon, and even more . . .

Above the ministers are the stars of the zodiac, which are fixed in one sphere, and do not move about like the ministers. Their distances and relations to each other do not change. They have one motion which neither increases nor decreases. Their relation to the earth is the same. They appear altered depending upon the place on earth they are seen, and the movement of the sun.

The uppermost world is the world of the holy angels, who are neither bodies nor in bodies like the soul of man. Their rank is elevated above the base intellects of

Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Long Commentary on Exodus*, trans. C. Manekin, from *Perushei ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Avraham Ibn Ezra*, ed. A. Weizer (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976)